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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 009696

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#)  
SUBJECT: LIMITED PROGRESS ON DOMESTIC EXTREMISM

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ISLAMABAD 00009696 001.2 OF 003

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**¶11.** (U) This is the third in a series of four cables assessing the GOP's progress in its crackdown on extremism.

**¶12.** (S/NF) Summary: Progress on combating domestic extremism, part of the GOP's July 2005 crackdown, has suffered from competing priorities, limited political capital, and a vocal opposition from Islamic conservatives. While initial GOP actions detained a number of second-tier leaders and foot soldiers from domestic extremist groups, shuttered hate publications, and forced groups to drop their public profile, these gains have, in large part, been allowed to lapse. Legislative changes to prevent discrimination against religious minorities continue to languish in parliament, held hostage by conservative elements in the ruling party. Attempts by the GOP to regulate madrassas have been persistently weakened in response to demands from madrassa leaders. The Northern Areas, however, present a sharp contrast to the general trend. There, a sustained campaign by security forces against both Sipah-i-Sahaba (SSP) and Sipah-i-Mohammad (SMP) has curtailed their operations and restored peace to the troubled Gilgit district. End Summary.

#### Extremist Groups

**¶13.** (S/NF) The country's prominent domestic extremist groups Sipah-i-Sahaba (SSP), Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LJ), and Sipah-i-Mohammad (SMP) were among the first banned by President Musharraf in January 2002. Sunni Tehrik escaped banning, due to its ties to senior military and government officials, and continued both its assassination campaign against Deobandi clerics and its political activities largely

unimpeded. Prior to their listing, banned groups engaged in regular assassination of each other's leaders and supporters, frequent mob violence against religious and political opponents, and outright armed clashes in certain Punjabi districts. SSP and SMP maintained an active political wing, holding frequent public rallies and participating in elections, with the SSP regularly winning provincial and national assembly seats from its home district of Jhang.

¶4. (S/NF) Following the ban, these groups were required to take a lower public profile, curtailing public meetings; their militant wings, however, continued operations and SSP retained its Jhang seat. Due to heightened scrutiny, the militant wings were required to curtail the scope of operations, focusing on higher profile suicide bombings of religious opponents' mosques and gatherings and assassinations of religious clergy. When disputes over textbooks exploded into societal violence in the Northern Areas in 2004, SSP and SMP established armed wings in Gilgit, fomenting additional violence and turning the town into a battleground. LJ, which had increased the scope of its activities to include Christian, Hindu, and western targets post-September 11, had already suffered a setback following its participation in the unsuccessful December 2004 attempts on President Musharraf's life: many of its senior leaders were arrested and still remain in detention, and its activities were placed under closer scrutiny by intelligence and law enforcement officials. Even so, the group was still able to carry out high profile, successful suicide attacks against Brailvi/Shi'a targets. As of July 2005, SSP, ST, and SMP leaders were at large, highly visible in public media, and actively participating in politics.

¶5. (S/NF) In the immediate aftermath of President Musharraf's July 2005 crackdown announcement, the prominence of all

ISLAMABAD 00009696 002.2 OF 003

sectarian groups, including ST, diminished. Police detained approximately 320 second-tier leaders and activists from SSP, SMP, ST, and LJ under anti-terrorism provisions. Main leaders of the organizations curtailed public events and press statements and, in some cases, effectively went into hiding. Hate publications by domestic extremist, militant, and terrorist organizations were seized from vendors in major cities, and restrictions on radical clerics' use of mosque loudspeakers were put in place. In late September 2005, security forces arrested senior LJ leader Asif Choto and successfully disrupted the activities of the organization's Islamabad/Rawalpindi cell. In mid-October 2005, the GOP launched a security force operation in the Gilgit district to curtail the activities of SSP and SMP. Local leaders of both groups were detained on terrorism charges (and remain in prison in Rawalpindi), supporters were disarmed, and order was largely restored to the town.

¶6. (S/NF) These gains against domestic extremist organizations were not sustained. In the aftermath of the October 8 earthquake, government attention was largely diverted. Approximately half of those detained were released within 30 days. The remainder were freed by January 2006. Confiscation of hate publications effectively ceased in October 2005 and has, for the most part, not resumed. In many urban areas, use of mosque loudspeakers for extremist propaganda resumed by October and November 2005. Despite some restrictions on their activities both SSP and ST ran candidates in the local bodies elections in August and October 2005. While we are unaware of any domestic extremist group participation in earthquake relief efforts, SSP, SMP, and ST all raised funds among supporters, ostensibly to aid earthquake victims. This allowed their leaders to reassert a public presence that was further strengthened during protests over the Bajaur incident and the Danish cartoons. SSP, SMP, and ST continued to assassinate the others' members and clerics from opposing religious sects. SSP and LJ supporters were responsible for suicide bombings of religious gatherings, including the February 2006 attack in Hangu and

the April 2006 attack in Karachi. The April 2006 Karachi attack was a major setback for ST, as many of its leaders were killed in the suicide bombing. A major SSP conference on the outskirts of Islamabad in mid-April is widely seen as evidence that restrictions on public activities by the domestic extremist organizations will again be ignored.

#### Madrasa Reform

¶7. (C/NF) Madrasa reform was already well-advanced prior to the July 2005 crackdown. In June 2002, the GOP issued directives requiring registration of foreign students, banning foreign funding of madrassas, and requiring registration with one of the five independent madrasa boards or directly with the GOP. Most madrassas complied with the student and school registration requirements. While madrassas openly flouted the ban on foreign financing whenever possible, the ban did largely end government funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that previously supported a large number of such schools. In addition, the GOP had negotiated agreements with the madrasa boards that resulted in the phased-in introduction of modern subjects at schools under their control and banned the teaching of sectarian hatred, militancy, or extremism.

¶8. (C/NF) As part of his July 2005 crackdown, Musharraf promised to ban foreign students, to require direct registration with the GOP, and to introduce a national examination scheme for madrassas. Musharraf enacted the foreign student ban in July 2005 with an effective date of December 31, 2005. Registered Afghan refugees were exempted

ISLAMABAD 00009696 003.2 OF 003

from this ban. The Interior Ministry deported an unknown number of foreign students and claimed that 95 percent of foreign students had left madrassas. Note: We believe that the Interior Ministry tracking system is reliable. End Note.

The GOP has no immediate plans to revise the ban on foreign students. The GOP chose to negotiate with the madrasa boards on examination and registration. Musharraf signed a December 2005 order on registration that requires a yearly description of educational activities and a financial auditor's statement for all registered madrassas. It also bans the teaching of sectarian hatred, militancy, or extremism. The order is a step back from earlier versions that would have required extensive yearly audits of madrasa finances and activities -- steps that would have enabled more effective GOP oversight. Approximately 11,000 out of an estimated 13,000 to 15,000 madrassas have registered. Discussions on a national examination scheme continue between the madrasa boards and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. No madrassas have yet been closed for violations of either the post-September 11 or the July 2005 orders, nor has enforcement action been taken against those madrassas operated by domestic extremist groups and/or those teaching sectarian hatred, militancy, and extremism.

#### Comment

¶9. (S/NF) Islamist politicians and conservative religious clerics have vocally opposed all parts of the GOP crackdown on domestic extremism. In addition, some in the GOP's own parliamentary party and in the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz have opposed action against SSP and ST and madrasa reform. Liberal opposition parties have consistently refused to defend any action by the Musharraf government, leaving the GOP without political support for these initiatives. In the face of strong societal backlash over Bajaur and the Danish cartoons and the upcoming national and provincial elections, the GOP has been reluctant to advance forcibly an admittedly controversial agenda. While we understand the GOP's reluctance, renewed focus on domestic extremism is a critical component of meaningfully advancing Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" agenda. The informal ties that many domestic extremist groups have developed with designated foreign terrorist organizations are equally

worrying. Sustained international pressure will be necessary to focus GOP attention on this component of the Global War on Terror. End Comment.

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